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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ANKARA 000622

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [IR](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY/IRAN -- NOT UPSETTING THE NEIGHBORS

REF: A. 2005 ANKARA 6546

- [1](#)B. 2005 ANKARA 7098
- [1](#)C. ANKARA 28
- [1](#)D. ANKARA 16

Classified By: Ambassador Ross L. Wilson, E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. While the Turkish government publicly declares that a nuclear-armed Iran is not in Turkey's interest, it will not get out front on the issue for fear of irritating a neighbor with which Turkey has a delicate political and growing economic relationship:

-- Turkey does not wish to jeopardize continued Iranian support against Kurdish separatists in the border area;

-- the GOT fears that Iran could again seek to export religious fundamentalism to Turkey, as it sought to do in the 1980s;

-- Turkey and Iran enjoy a healthy trade relationship in which Iranian natural gas plays a significant part, and Turkey hosts nearly one million Iranian tourists per year; and

-- after its experience with the Iraq war, Turkey wishes to avoid another conflict on its borders, and fears U.S. moves against Iran are leading in that direction.

Even in the shorter term, Turkey believes -- correctly -- that sanctions against Iran would unduly hurt Turkey, for which it could exact little or no compensatory assistance. Our goal should be to ensure Turkey stays with the international consensus and avoid a situation in which Turkey tries to play mediator. Convincing Turkey's military will be the easier sell, convincing PM Erdogan's Islamist government will be much harder. End Summary

GOT Soft on Ahmadi-Nejad,s Rants, Mottaki Visits Ankara

[1](#)3. (C) The GOT has declined to issue unequivocal statements with regard to Iran,s nuclear ambitions. Its fence-sitting was preceded by a weak response to Iranian President Ahmadi-nejad,s December comments against Israel and rejection of the Holocaust (ref a). Despite our interventions at several levels, statements by senior GOT leaders fell well short of the condemnation heard in European and non-European capitals.

14. (C) Iranian FM Mottaki's November 2005 visit to Turkey is another example (ref b). Turkish officials told us they delivered a strong message to Mottaki in private regarding Iran,s need to comply with the IAEA, warning that referral to the UNSC was "in nobody,s interest." However, Turkish and Iranian officials spent the bulk of the visit discussing bilateral economic and political relations. The cordial tone was especially noteworthy, given that Mottaki, while Ambassador here in the 1980s, was asked to leave early under suspicion of seeking to import the Iranian revolution to Turkey. Even with positive atmospherics, little on Turkey's agenda was achieved, according to National Security Council Secretary-General Alpogon (ref c). The GOT had thought

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Mottaki would signal Iran,s desire for better ties by delivering on one or both of Turkey,s two long-standing, high-stakes commercial disputes with the GOI, but Mottaki came empty-handed.

Iran Nuclear: Turkey Behind the Curve

15. (C) Turkey's approach has changed only minimally, despite Iran's recent antics. The government did not respond to the January 9 EU announcement on referral until January 14, when the MFA issued a tepid statement that noted the Iranian decision to resume "nuclear research and development" -- not enrichment. The Turkish statement also asserted, "It is our hope that this decision will not adversely affect Iran,s cooperation with the IAEA or the negotiation process between Iran the EU Troika that resumed on 21 December 2005." The GOT statement was clearly behind the curve, apparently reflecting wishful thinking that the EU-3 negotiations were

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merely suspended and could be re-started at any time.

16. (C) The self-delusion has continued. On January 17, PM Erdogan repeated the Turkish position that Iranian-EU-3 negotiations should continue and added that Iran, with its "moderate policies," plays a crucial role and that it was very important to establish a "just peace" in the region. Speaking to EU ambassadors here on January 20, Erdogan passed up a softball question that would have enabled him to associate Turkey with European diplomacy on Iran. On January 27, PM Erdogan stated that the EU-3 decision to refer the Iranian issue to the UNSC "disturbs us psychologically."

The Turkish View of Iran

17. (C) Turks do not hold a monolithic view of the Iranian nuclear issue. Secular Turks tend to be more concerned about Iran,s pursuit of nuclear weapons than pious Turks, who have sympathy for fellow Muslims. The military as a whole is more concerned than the civilian government, and those within the government who work the issue tend to be more concerned than those at the top, but there are exceptions. Where some political figures, including prominent Erdogan advisors, discount reports about Iran's nuclear ambitions, many others -- including secular senior bureaucrats -- seem to believe a nuclear Iran is inevitable; the sooner the world accommodates itself to this, the better -- and the less painful for Turkey. Many Turks, both secular and pious, abhor the possibility of another war in their region; harbor anti-American sentiments; grudgingly respect Iranian culture and power; and remain deeply concerned about the broader political and economic fallout from potential international intervention against Iran, which they fear would come quickly and destructively when diplomacy fails to succeed. At the same time, many Turks recognize that a nuclear-armed Iran is not in Turkey,s national security interests and would

undermine Turkey's position in the regional balance of power.

Delicate Economic/Energy Relations

¶18. (C) Another factor influencing Turkish views of the Iranian nuclear program is the Turkish-Iranian trade relationship. A large number of Iranian tourists visit Turkey every year -- 950,000 in 2005 alone. Business is helped by the fact that Iranians do not need visas to enter Turkey. Two-way trade has grown from about \$1 billion in 2000 to \$4 billion in 2005, due overwhelmingly to Turkish imports of natural gas and oil (2005 Turkish exports to Iran amount to \$820 million and imports from Iran to \$3.2 billion). There is also a heavy illicit trade in heroin and other narcotics, smuggled fuel, and other items.

¶19. (C) Iran has proven a difficult and unreliable trade partner for Turkey. It cut gas exports both this winter and last. This year, gas shipments to Turkey fell by about 70 percent, producing a shortfall in Turkey of 15 to 20 percent on a daily basis, for technical (more gas is needed in Iran during cold temperatures) and potentially political reasons. Turkey would have grounds to cancel its gas supply contract based on last year's cuts, but will likely not pursue this option for energy supply diversification and political reasons. The Iranian government has also blocked Turkish companies, efforts to win an airport construction and management contract and to buy a telecommunications company. Still, the Turks want to deal with their neighbor.

AKP Politics and Iran

¶10. (C) Turkey's ruling Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP) must also contend with public perceptions of the Iranian nuclear issue, especially the views of pious Sunni Turks who form the backbone of AKP's electoral support. According to national security expert Faruk Demir (strictly protect), pious Sunni Turks tend to admire Iran because it is a Muslim country that stands up to the West, defends the Palestinians, and tries to organize its laws according to the Koran. This may be somewhat balanced by Sunni disassociation from Shi'ism here, as well as by the

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patronizing attitude that former Ottomans have toward former Persians.

¶11. (C) Many AKP members do not believe Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons. In his January 20 remarks to EU ambassadors, PM Erdogan said he did not believe Iran is developing nuclear weapons, and Erdogan advisor Nabi Avci told us the same thing January 19. Many AKP members and pious Turks think that a nuclear Iran would not attack a Muslim brother, according to Demir.

¶12. (C) AKP members and supporters are also motivated by feelings of Muslim solidarity. They believe that they have a moral responsibility to protect fellow Muslims, especially from infidels. AKP MP Cicek told us that he would never support an American or Western attack on a fellow Muslim country because he never wants his son to face the shame of meeting a Muslim Turkey helped attack. This sentiment is common among AKP MPs and voters alike.

¶13. (C) Ahmet Davutoglu, a senior foreign policy advisor to both PM Erdogan and FM Gul, is also a major factor in AKP's strategic approach. Davutoglu is an advocate of so-called "strategic depth," arguing that Turkey should reduce the centrality of Europe and the U.S. in Turkey's overall strategic decision making and enhance its relations with non-Western countries, especially Turkey's Muslim neighbors. Maintaining good relations with Iran is an important part of

this strategic vision.

The Secular Establishment - Cautious

¶14. (C) All of our contacts at the MFA, NSC, and in the Turkish military tell us that they are convinced that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons and that a nuclear armed Iran would be a threat to Turkish interests. MFA Undersecretary Ali Tuygan recently told the Ambassador that Turkey supports US and EU diplomacy on Iran, but declined to indicate what Turkey might further do or say on the issue. He also recognized that a nuclear armed Iran would have extremely important security consequences for Turkey. National Security Council Secretary-General Yigit Alpogan told us that Iran's nuclear ambitions "are a real concern in Ankara," and that the GOT is committed to cooperate on a diplomatic solution.

¶15. (C) These sentiments were echoed by MFA First Secretary Guven Begec who told us that Turkey shares USG concerns regarding the Iranian nuclear program and believes that Iranian nuclear weapons would pose a direct threat to Turkey's national security. He also stated that the Iranian nuclear weapons issue was a matter of national security and the institutions of the state would be making the decisions on this issue. He said it would not be a "party" decision. (Comment: A reference to the governing AKP. End comment.)

¶16. (C) Turkish General Staff Chief General Hilmi Ozkok remarked to us that, while Turkish-Iranian relations were good now, Iran's intentions could change suddenly. Iran, therefore, must be kept from acquiring nuclear weapons. At the same time, Ozkok worried that isolating Iran might increase its incentive to acquire WMD. He also expressed concern about Iranian influence in the Caucasus.

Iran as a Potential Destabilizing Neighbor

¶17. (C) MFA International Security Department Head Ambassador Hayati Guven, MFA South Asia Department Head Murat Ulku, and other interlocutors have expressed worries that Iran, under President Ahmadi-Nejad, may try to export its Islamic revolution to Turkey as it did in the 1980s. Turkish journalist Ihan Simsek (strictly protect) reported that the Iranian DCM told him that if Turkey helps the West against Iran, then "Turkish-Iranian relations will be worse than they were in the 1980s," a statement the journalist perceived as a threat. These interlocutors also stress to us the importance of Turkey's growing trade relationship with Iran and Iran's assistance to Turkey regarding the PKK. According to Turkish military contacts, Turkey and Iran began sharing intelligence this summer on the PKK, holding regular meetings at the

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border. As of September, Iran had turned over 40 suspected PKK members or sympathizers.

¶18. (C) Comment. Turkey will continue to play catch up on Iran, pressed by US, the EU (as a candidate country it is required generally to adhere to EU policy decisions), and the Israelis. Turkish officials are unlikely to play a forward-leaning role in seeking to convince Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program. As a result, we must persuade Turkey to keep in step with the growing international consensus. We need to remind Turkish authorities and the Turkish public that the issue is not whether they would support a war against Iran, but whether the international community should speak with one voice in persuading Iran to comply with its international obligations under the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Turks need to be reminded of the danger, not only of a nuclear armed Iran on their border, but also of the possibility of a world where the NPT breaks

down; dozens of countries acquire nuclear weapons, and the potential for criminal or terrorist groups to acquire nuclear weapons will be greatly increased. Perhaps the argument that will strike home the most with Turks is that a nuclear Iran would substantially alter the balance of power in this region, expose Turkey even more than now on NATO's front-line, and rob Turkey of the important regional role that PM Erdogan and his party so desire. End Comment.
WILSON